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UNCLAS CAIRO 002722

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: EGYPTIAN REACTION TO DEATH OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: The GOE, Egyptian religious leaders, and the Egyptian media have joined the worldwide outpouring of condolences and respect on the occasion of the death of Pope John Paul II. Although the Roman Catholic population of Egypt is relatively small (about 350,000 from a total Egyptian Christian population of nearly 8 million), the Egyptian response is an indication of the late Pope's stature in Egypt (especially on the issue of the Arab/Palestinian "cause") as well as the GOE's desire to signal its engagement on this issue. End summary.

¶2. (U) The Presidency announced that Minister of Culture Farouk Hosny will lead the official GOE delegation to the funeral on Friday. The GOE also announced a three day mourning period and issued a statement noting that President Mubarak mourned the loss of the Pope who had "served as a symbol of love and peace, a preacher of dialogue among religions and civilizations, and a supporter of the values of righteousness and justice, including Arab and Palestinian causes." Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa also plans to attend the funeral.

¶3. (U) Egyptian religious leaders have also expressed their respects. Sheikh of Al-Azhar Sayyed Tantawi described the Pope's passing as a loss for the Church and the Islamic world. Tantawi's words echoed Mubarak's as he lauded John Paul II's support for righteousness and peace and expressed appreciation for the Pope's support for Arab causes in Palestine and Iraq. Minister of Religious Endowments (Awqaf) Hamdy Zaqqug called on the Pope's successor to follow in John Paul II's footsteps and continue his contributions to peace. Finally, Dar al-Ifta'a, the official body responsible for the issuance of Islamic legal opinions, issued a statement recognizing the Pope's efforts for peace and justice and his support of Arab causes, "especially the Palestinian cause."

¶4. (SBU) His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, spiritual leader to Egypt's seven million strong Coptic Orthodox community, praised John Paul II's "noble attributes" and his "great contribution to ecumenical work." Comment: Shenouda, who is in his early eighties, appears to be in good health for a man of his age, but the passing of John Paul II is a reminder that the Coptic Orthodox Church will likely face its own succession process in a relatively short time. End comment.

¶5. (U) On April 5, the Charge, along with numerous other members of the diplomatic corps and Egyptian governmental and non-governmental luminaries, visited the Papal Nuncio to sign the condolence book.

¶6. (SBU) The Egyptian media devoted extensive, factual coverage to the story of the Pope's death. Editorial coverage for the most part was laudatory and non-controversial, though a writer in opposition newspaper Al-Wafd sounded a discordant note when he asserted that John Paul II's "wooing" of Jews and Israel was unsuccessful due to the late Pope's "support for Arab causes."

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